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## Sraffa's Notes on Wittgenstein's "Blue Book"

### *1. Introduction*

In the Preface to the published version of *Philosophical Investigations*, dated "January 1945", Wittgenstein acknowledges the "criticism" that Sraffa "unceasingly applied to [his] thoughts" and actually writes that "[i]t is to this stimulus that [he] owe[s] the most fruitful ideas of this book" (PI 2009: 4). It is worth mentioning that the drafts for the Preface to the early version of the *Investigations*, prepared in 1938, also contain this acknowledgment (cf. MS 159: 40r-40v; MS 117: 114-115, 119-120 and 125-126; TS 225: III; PIP 2010: 188), and as a matter of fact Wittgenstein already mentions Sraffa in his 1931 list of influences (cf. VB 1998: 16). As pointed out by Alois Pichler in a note on this list in his revised edition of *Culture and Value*, "Wittgenstein first wrote 'Frege, Russell, Spengler, Sraffa' and added the other names later" (ibid.: 101, note 8). This clearly shows that Sraffa exerted a lasting influence on Wittgenstein. However, apart from the various versions of the Preface in which the above-mentioned acknowledgment occurs, Sraffa's name is rarely found in Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*. Indeed, there are only three relevant remarks, which date from 1932, 1937 and 1940 (cf. MS 113: 25r-25v; MS 157b: 5v; MS 117: 172). No surprise then that in his book on the figures listed by Wittgenstein in 1931 and the role they played, Allan Janik has left out Sraffa, stating that "the exact nature of Sraffa's influence upon Wittgenstein remains a mystery and a matter for speculation until today" (2006: 224; see also 11). Brian McGuinness' new edition of the Wittgenstein correspondence (WC 2008) brought to light not

only letters but also conversation notes that help to clarify Sraffa's place in the development of Wittgenstein's ideas. However, none of these documents make explicit the "stimulus" Wittgenstein talks about and that G. H. von Wright, for example, also recalls. In his memoir we read:

It was above all Sraffa's acute and forceful criticism that compelled Wittgenstein to abandon his earlier views and set out upon new roads. He said that his discussions with Sraffa made him feel like a tree from which all branches had been cut. That this tree could become green again was due to its own vitality. (von Wright 2001: 14-15)

In a recent paper, Franco Lo Piparo (2010) argues that Sraffa's influence on Wittgenstein can only be fully accessed if we take into consideration another figure: Antonio Gramsci. Lo Piparo builds on Amartya Sen's insightful suggestion that "it may be important to reexamine Sraffa's interactions with Wittgenstein ... in the light of Sraffa's relationship with Antonio Gramsci, the Marxist theorist, who had a strong influence on Sraffa" (Sen 2003: 1241). Sen, in turn, is following John B. Davis (2002a; see also 2002b), who had first focused on that triad. Lo Piparo's extensive study of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and of the correspondence between Sraffa and Gramsci's sister-in-law, who transcribed his letters for Sraffa while he was in prison, illuminates significantly the impact Sraffa may have had on Wittgenstein. There are many aspects in Gramsci's thought that are truly reminiscent of issues characteristic of the later Wittgenstein. Be that as it may, Wittgenstein's debt to Sraffa continues to be a matter of speculation.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I shall add a new piece to the puzzle: an unpublished document that is among the Sraffa papers at Trinity College Library, Cambridge.

This document consists of a series of notes on Wittgenstein's "Blue Book", dictated in 1933-34, written by Sraffa on the back of two diary sheets dated "October 1941" and on the front and back of an envelope. Included in the folder (Sraffa/I21) is a letter from Sraffa to von Wright dated 27 August 1958, which reads:

On comparing my copy of the Blue Book with the recently published edition I find that it contains a number of small corrections in

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<sup>1</sup> Sinha (2006), for example, is much less sanguine about Gramsci's influence on Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein's handwriting which have not been taken into account in the printed version. I suppose that he made these corrections when he gave me the book which was shortly after the death of Skinner, to whom it had originally belonged.<sup>2</sup>

According to the 1960 "Note on the Second Impression" of *The Blue and Brown Books. Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations"*, first published by Rush Rhees in 1958, "[t]here are a few alterations, taken from a text of the Blue Book in the possession of Mr. P. Sraffa", but "[w]ith the exception of changes on pp. 1 and 17 they make no difference in the sense, being mostly improvements in punctuation and grammar" (BBB 1960). This means that if Sraffa's notes played any role, it must be found in what Wittgenstein wrote after October 1941 – the month of Francis Skinner's death. Let us then look at the notes.

## 2. Text

Among Sraffa's notes, we find two different types of text: comments and quotations. The comments are found on the back of the diary sheets. They are written in pencil and there are no entries on the front pages. The dates are from 12 to 18 October and from 5 to 11 October 1941, respectively.<sup>3</sup> The quotations appear on the front and back of the envelope (from Trinity College to Sraffa).

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<sup>2</sup> This part of the letter is quoted in Sen 2003: 1243, note 8. It corresponds to Sraffa/I21/1. The folder also contains a short note dated 26 March 1975 (Sraffa/I21/5), a handwritten copy of a letter from von Wright to Sraffa of 5 September 1958 (Sraffa/I21/6) and a newscutting of a small review of *The Blue and Brown Books*, published in *The Economist* on 3 January 1959 (Sraffa/I21/7). It is worth mentioning that von Wright's correspondence with Sraffa is not included in his collection kept at the National Library of Finland in Helsinki (Coll. 714).

<sup>3</sup> Francis Skinner died on 11 October.

## 2.1. Comments

[Sraffa/I21/2]

1) You say: circumstances. Why always torn out or made up phrases? Why don't you take them from the works of some phil[osophers] e.g.

...

2) Cause. Is it, historically, true?

3) Remedy. Does it in fact cure?

4) Metaphysics, why not theology?

5) Psycho-An[alysis], dispute

2-3 bis) When you describe the cause of these puzzles and prescribe the remedy you act as a scientist <sup>(like Freud)</sup>. Have you found out whether these puzzles have in fact arisen out of this attitude to language (II, 13 [41] <sup>4</sup>), have you made sure that they did not exist before anyone took that attitude etc? And also, is it a fact that the disease is cured by your prescription?

[Sraffa/I21/3]

cont. <sup>Even</sup> if this is so, you have only based it on your assertion, you have not given the evidence (Cp. the mass of *actual* examples produced by Freud).

You say “it is no use” answering the solipsist with common sense (p. 70 [98]), and you prescribe a “cure”. Now, as a matter of fact, have no solipsists been “cured” by common sense?

Arising from the above, why do you deal only with made up examples (or, if they are actual, torn off from their circumstances) instead of with quotations from philosophers' books?

Also, why do you deal always with metaphysics and never with theology? Are not their puzzles very similar (e.g. omniscience in god and freewill in man)? But could it be said that theol[ogical] puzzles

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<sup>4</sup> Sraffa's (or Skinner's) copy of the “Blue Book” differs from the one published in the *Bergen Electronic Edition* (item 309), consisting of two duplicated “Blue Books”. As can be seen from some exemplars housed at Trinity College Library, “Vol. I” comprised 34 pages, corresponding to the first 34 pages of the Bergen copy, whereas “Vol. II” started with page 7 and ended with page 96, corresponding to pages 35 and 124 respectively in the Bergen edition. I use square brackets to indicate the page numbers in the latter.

only arise when people take the calculus' attitude to language? (N.B. I am *not* suggesting that this is the reason you leave theology alone)

## 2.2. Quotations

[Sraffa/I21/4r]

II

p. 9 [37] end of §2 “in order to break the spell” (but why should we want to?)

p. 16 [44] l. 3-4 “Philosophy is a fight against the fascination which forms of expression exert upon us.” (cp. p. 77 [105] §1 and p. 17 [45] end)

l. 5-6 “I want you to remember that words have those meanings which we have given them:[:] and we give them meanings by explanations.” (and the rest of the para[graph] 7 following one)

p. 16 [44] PARA[GRAPH] 4 Meaning given by someone

p. 22 [50] §2 “We are here *mised* by the substantives ...[”]

p. 29 [57] l. 6 from bottom “an unclarity about the grammar of words” = Metaphysics

p. 51 [79] §3 “Trouble *caused* by our way of expression”

p. 58 [86] middle “language is slightly cumbrous and sometimes misleading”

p. 66 [94] §2<sup>and 67 [95] §1</sup> General rule

p. 68 [96] “They state their case *wrongly* ... For if they don't *wish* to talk of ... they should not use ...[”] *Psychoanalytical Dispute*

p. 70 [98] l. 8 “solving their (philosophical) puzzles, *i.e.* curing them of the temptation to ...”

Further down: “*Source* of this puzzlement”

p. 81 [109] end “the phrase ‘I think I mean something by it’ ... is for us no justification at all” “doesn't interest me” “calculus”

p. 82 [110] end “apparently unimportant details of the particular situation in which we are inclined to make a certain metaphysical assertion”

[Sraffa/I21/4v]

p. 70 [98] Philosophers' disagreement "not founded on a more subtle knowledge of fact"

I

p. 9 l. 9 f[rom] bottom "a puzzlement caused by the mystifying nature of our language"

p. 28 §3 Philosophers tempted by methods of science and source of metaphysics

II

p. 12 [40] second half

language as exact calculus

p. 13 [41] these puzzles "always spring from just this attitude towards language"

### *3. Commentary*

It is strange that Sraffa had commented on the "Blue Book" so late and even more that these comments might have been important for Wittgenstein, whose thought was in continuous evolution. But it is noteworthy that, for example, in MS 165, which von Wright (1993: 488) tentatively dates to "1941-44", Wittgenstein takes up the issue of solipsism such as is presented in the "Blue Book" (see MS 165: 101-103 and 150-152; BBB 1960, esp. 48-49, 57-61, 63-65 and 71). Here Wittgenstein was of the opinion that the solipsist could always resist common sense even if the language-game at stake involved a clear contradiction in terms of action. According to the author of the "Blue Book", "[o]ne can defend common sense against the attacks of philosophers only by solving their puzzles, i.e., by curing them of the temptation to attack common sense, not by restating the views of common sense" (BBB 1960: 58-59). The way Wittgenstein exposes the question in MS 165 is exactly the same. He does not seem to accept Sraffa's suggestion that common sense can make the solipsist see that there is no point in it. The reason for that is simple. If a philosopher gets "cured" of

solipsism by common sense, he or she must have first realized that there was an incompatibility between his or her language-games and the practice associated to them. Does the solipsist really believe that he or she is the only being in the world in everyday life? Of course not, but this is not enough to repudiate solipsism. It could be an ingredient of this solipsistic form of life that other selves take part in it. As Wittgenstein points out in the “Blue Book”, there is no disagreement in solipsism “about any question of fact” (ibid.: 59). The result would be a compromise between what common sense teaches and a metaphysical position. This is what Wittgenstein wants to eliminate and that is why he insists we must solve “these puzzles”. Wittgenstein’s second discussion of solipsism in MS 165 illuminates this and works like a reply to Sraffa. Here is the most relevant part of it, which I quote in the original:

The nonsense against which I fight is the semi-solipsism that ~~always~~ says I know the sensation intimately since *I* have it and I now *generalize* ~~on the basis of this knowledge.~~ <sup>my</sup> case.

You learned the *concept* “pains” in learning language.

James’ psychology shows how necessary the work of philosophy is. Psychology, he says, is a science but it discusses nearly no scientific questions. His movements are nothing but /<sup>so many</sup>/ attempts to liberate himself from the spider’s web of metaphysics, in which he is trapped. He cannot yet walk, or fly at all he only wiggles.<sup>5</sup> Not that this is not interesting; ~~it~~ it is simply not ~~scie~~ a scientific activity. (MS 165: 150-151)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This sentence is in English in the original.

<sup>6</sup> I have added to the Normalized transcription offered by the *Bergen Electronic Edition* some features of the Diplomatic transcription, namely deleted text, indication of insertions and wavy underlining, here represented by a dotted line. The first two remarks were crossed out by Wittgenstein. They were however retrieved, with some changes, in MS 124 (283-284), in entries that must be later than 3 July 1944, a date we find on page 205. It may be conjectured that MS 165 thus dates from 1944, but it is also possible that Wittgenstein simply came back to it at that time. The second of the crossed out remarks will actually reappear in MS 129 (114-115) and TS 227a/b (220, §384), as well as TS 228 (75, §259) and TS 230 (101, §366). I am here following Hacker’s and Schulte’s translation of this remark (PI 2009: §384). The translation of the other remarks is my own. I thank Klaus Gärtner for his help, in particular for his reading in the third remark of “bespricht” in place of “hinspricht”, erroneously transcribed in the Bergen edition.

The “nonsense” of “semi-solipsism” is far from that of the “metaphysical subject” in the *Tractatus*, that is to say, it is not something that can be encapsulated in a “mystical feeling” (cf. TLP 1933: 5.633, 5.641 and 6.45). It corresponds instead to manoeuvres made in language which the very praxis of language rules out. The purpose of philosophy is then psychotherapeutic in a certain way. Philosophical therapy helps to recognize that, for instance, it is not false but nonsensical to believe that only I know my pain when I am going to see a doctor. Certainly no one can tell exactly what my experience is, but it belongs to the use of “to know” that others can realize what is happening to me. The fact is that “to know” is used in many different ways, each involving different degrees of belief. If I were to say that only I know my pain, what could these words mean? What degree of belief should be assigned to them? They could make some sense if I were an outstanding doctor who had discovered a new pathology. But they do not make sense if I mean literally that the others cannot know my pain. To be sure, what would it be like to know exactly someone else’s pains? Do we have a clear picture of that? This is excluded by our form of life and language can only mistakenly suggest such a possibility. When we notice the multifaceted character of knowing something, we understand the confusion involved in a sentence like “Only I know my pain”. This cannot be resolved by common sense, as Sraffa believed, because it is not a factual but a metaphysical matter, with the role of philosophy being just one of clarification.

However, Sraffa’s notes seem to have been acute in regard to another question. His first quotation comes from a sentence in which Wittgenstein claims that “[w]e shall ... try to construct new notations, in order to break the spell of those which we are accustomed to” (BBB 1960: 23). Later in the text he affirms:

... we sometimes wish for a notation which stresses a difference more strongly, makes it more obvious, than ordinary language does, or one which in a particular case uses more closely similar forms of expression than our ordinary language. Our mental cramp is loosened when we are shown the notations which fulfil these needs. (Ibid.: 59)



Interestingly enough, with the exception of §403 and §562, the term “notation” is not employed in the *Investigations*. As a matter of fact, §403 states:

If I were to reserve the word “pain” solely for what I had previously called “my pain”, and others “L.W.’s pain”, I’d do other people no injustice, so long as a notation were provided in which the loss of the word “pain” in other contexts were somehow made good. ...

But what would I gain from this new mode of representation? Nothing. But then the solipsist does not *want* any practical advantage when he advances his view either! (PI 2009: §403)<sup>7</sup>

This is a puzzling remark. As David Stern recently noted, “[t]here is no defence of the controversial claim that reforming our language in this way would do other people no injustice and no discussion of what kind of ‘notation’ would be needed to provide for the loss of the word ‘pain’”. He goes on: “Indeed, the very nature of the new notation is left unspecified.” (Stern 2010: 185) Sraffa’s comments are also vague, but the reason why Wittgenstein does not specify this alternative notation seems to be his realization that *we should not want* “to break the spell of those which we are accustomed to”, as claimed in the “Blue Book”. On his way to the *Investigations* he realizes that what we need is to look at our ordinary language-games and understand how language is used. The fundamental question of the “Blue Book”, “What is the meaning of a word?”, which for Wittgenstein should be answered in connection with the question about the “explanation of the meaning of a word” (cf. BBB 1960: 1), gives room in the *Investigations* to a much more flexible conception of grammar. Wittgenstein takes issue, for example, with “words ‘without meaning’” and what interests him is not their explanation but the effect they produce (see PI 2009: §13 and §282). Sraffa did certainly play a decisive role in this new approach through his “anthropological way” of considering philosophical matters, which Sen emphasizes (cf. Sen 2003: 1242, 1245-1247 and 1252; Sen 2009: 120-121). Although Sen himself tries to de-mystify Sraffa’s famous Neapolitan gesture (cf. Sen

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<sup>7</sup> This remark can be found in MS 116 (154-155), thus dating, according to von Wright (1993: 494) “from the academic year 1937-38”. It was then incorporated in TS 227a/b (228-229, §403), as well as TS 228 (33, §122) and TS 230 (84, §315).

2003: 1242; Sen 2009: 120-121, note), von Wright's version of the episode is telling. According to this version, which differs from Norman Malcolm's, "the question at issue ... was whether every proposition must have a 'grammar', and Sraffa asked Wittgenstein what the 'grammar' of that gesture was" (Malcolm 2001: 58, note 3). This is something Wittgenstein will only come to grips with late in his work.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> An earlier version of this work was presented at a conference in Toledo in 2011 and published as "Wittgenstein's Debt to Sraffa" in J. Padilla Gálvez and M. Gaffal (eds.), *Forms of Life and Language Games* (Frankfurt: Ontos, 2011), 187-195. This is a contribution to the research project "Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: Re-Evaluating a Project", funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology. I thank Professor Pierangelo Garegnani, literary executor of the Sraffa papers, for permission to publish Sraffa's notes. I also wish to thank Thomas Wallgren from the von Wright and Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Helsinki, where I first found a photocopy of the document in 2009, and Jonathan Smith from Trinity College Library, Cambridge, where I consulted the original in 2010.

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## *Biographical note*

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